

Sermon: The Once and Future Church
Preached at FCCW Virtual Worship Service on May 10, 2020
Acts 2:42-47

Once upon a time there was a church. Not just any church. I can say with confidence that it was a church unlike what any of us have ever seen. What made it so special?

First, its members devoted themselves to learning as much as they could about their faith. They devoted themselves to prayer. They devoted themselves to fellowshiping with one another and sharing meals together. *Devoted* themselves to those activities. It was not something that they approached with casual interest, not something they might squeeze into a busy day. These things were their number one priority. They were done out of desire, not out of obligation or tradition.

Their church life and ministry was not building dependent the way most churches are today. They met in their homes, and in the Jewish Temple courts, because they didn't have a proper sanctuary to call their own.

They didn't worry about declining membership like many churches do today because church growth was normal. Day by day the Lord added to their number. *Day by day!*

And the people who joined this church were from all walks of life, from servants to aristocrats. But you probably wouldn't know that, because ...and this may be the most astonishing thing of all about them... those who were well off sold their possessions and gave the money to others as they had need of it. Some people today might have labelled them socialists, or at the very least, "hippies."

Once upon a time there was such a church...

Does this all sound like a fairy tale to you? If it does, you are in good company. Some Biblical scholars have questioned whether this description of the earliest Christian community, that Luke presents in the book of Acts, was really an idealized portrait of a Church; one which didn't accurately reflect the less romanticized reality.

What we can say for certain is that, if there actually ever was a church like this one, it did not live happily ever after, the way fairy tale characters tend to do. Within a generation or so, churches were beginning to experience all kinds of problems. Most of the epistles in the New Testament were written by the founders of those congregations to deal with conflicts and confusion in the churches of that time. But cynicism alone based on the fact that since that time churches have repeatedly fallen short of this ideal, cannot justify abandoning the idea that such a community did once exist.

In any case, the question before us is the same. If there was such a church once, can it ever be again? And if it only existed as a blueprint in Luke's mind for the way a church should be, does that make it an impossible dream? Or, does this passage describes the once and future church. Can what once was, also represent the future of the church, as well?

The key observation that Luke made about this church was this: Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. The awe that came upon them was the growing realization that the Holy Spirit was alive and well among them. It was a holy fear, what is

sometimes called the “fear of God”. Not a fear of God because God is someone to be afraid of, but a sense of reverence; of being simultaneously dwarfed and magnified by God’s presence.

Awe came, not only upon them, but upon others who witnessed the power of this community. When outsiders looked at these Christians, they saw a people whose lives were so dramatically changed, and whose way of living was so radically different from the norm, that even they could sense the power behind the transformation. As a result, Luke says this church had the goodwill of all the people. I’m not sure if all people are awestruck by churches today. Or necessarily view them with good will. The numbers of many churches could hardly be described as being added to day by day.

If, indeed, the present Church fails to consistently inspire holy reverence in others, perhaps we would do well to ask if it is because we have lessened our devotion to cultivating such reverence in ourselves. If that is the case, then recapturing a sense of our own awe may be the key to the church re-establishing in the future what it once was. The way to do that is to learn from the “once upon a time church” that we read about in Acts. There we find three main characteristics of an awe-inspiring Church to emulate. They are spirituality, fellowship, and prophetic witness.

Many people today talk about being spiritual but not religious, as though those two things were mutually exclusive. But what gave the early church the power to be the dynamic community that it was, was its spirituality. Those believers had a profound sense of the reality of Christ’s presence among them that went beyond mere agreement about religious doctrine. They were serious about wanting to mature in their relationship to Christ; to live according to the ways that Jesus lived and taught. So, they devoted themselves to learning how to do that. They made prayer and worship priorities in their lives. It was their relationship to Jesus that gave them their identity. The strength of that church was not in human ideas but in Spiritual empowerment.

Studies today reveal that Christian lifestyles are often barely distinguishable from those of the unchurched. The frequency of divorce, domestic violence, racism, and materialism are just as high under steepled rooves as outside them. If the church of the future wants to stand out from the culture around it, its members must also devote themselves to understanding and experiencing their faith in ways that shapes their everyday life choices. Statistics show that parents who show an active interest in spirituality model a pattern that their children will more likely follow.

The second characteristic of the dynamic “once and future” church is fellowship. There is a Greek word used in the New Testament for fellowship that goes beyond the after-worship coffee hour kind of fellowship. It is *koinonia* and it refers to a unique type of community grounded in a trust in the abundant life that Christ promised and a commitment to the commandment to love one’s neighbors as we love ourselves. *Koinonia* is one of the signs and wonders that we could show to the world because it is a fellowship where people who would ordinarily have very little in common nevertheless share a common bond. It is typified by the sharing of one another’s burdens and joys. In the story of the “once upon a time church” it showed itself in the sharing of meals together and in the “What’s mine is yours” mentality that held all things in common. This *koinonia* within the church, gets turned outward in the third characteristic of the awe filled, awe inspiring church, which is prophetic witness. The authentic church knows the truth that the blessings that God bestows upon the church are intended for all peoples. So, rather than compromising with the surrounding culture, the church, through its outreach, calls the world around it to a higher standard of life.

Wendell Berry offered these thoughts on the nature of the koinonia church: "It seems to me we belong to each other and God. If that's accepted, there are many practical things you are committed to do. You see that nobody gets hungry, for instance. You see that nobody sleeps in the street. You see that children are taught - not just enough to get them a job or get them a diploma - but taught enough to function as responsible, affectionate members of the community."

The koinonia church cannot rest comfortably when so many of God's children live in poverty and preventable suffering. It is not content that its own members have learned to get along when there is still violence and war in the world. It is not satisfied with providing aid to victims, but is compelled to confront the systems that create victims in the first place.

Once upon a time there was such a church.

There has been some speculation around the possibility that this pandemic is waking churches up to an opportunity for being that "once upon a time church" once again. That the goal of "getting back to normal"--where normal is how we've always done things—may be overlooking valuable lessons that the pandemic has been teaching us.

Mothers' Day offers a perfect model of how great tragedy can be the catalyst for great reform. The origins of what we know now as Mother's Day are varied, but one story credits Anna Jarvis with creating the movement that led to the establishment of the holiday of Mother's Day. Anna was inspired by her own mother, Ann. Of the 13 children that Ann bore, only four lived to adulthood, largely due to epidemics that were spread by poor sanitary conditions in the Appalachian region where she lived. Ann helped organize events at which doctors educated local mothers on the latest hygiene practices that could keep their children healthy. They called the events Mothers' Day Work Clubs, and they helped shift the culture in a more life-sustaining direction. So, out of the tragedy of deadly epidemics emerged a movement to change the landscape of loss and heartbreak for future mothers.

Could it be that the heartbreak of this pandemic might revitalize the Church we know, to bring hope and healing in ways none of us have witnessed in our lifetimes? If churches have been functioning on a kind of autopilot for some time now, perhaps the challenge before us is to pay deeper attention to the voice of the Shepherd, calling us to follow him from the safe confines of the sheep pen to explore wide open pastures of abundant life.

You've probably heard it said that the last words of a dying church are, "We've never done it that way before." Maybe the first words of the future church will be something like, "We haven't done it that way for a long, long time...but we have done it before and we can do it again."

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